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The University of Montana

NEWS RELEASE

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UM STUDENT, OTHER BREAST CANCER SURVIVORS SCALE WESTERN HEMISPHERE'S HIGHEST PEAK

by Jessica Smith
University Communications

MISSOULA--

There are some challenges people face that are bigger than anything else they'll ever deal with. And then there are some that are merely the size of a mountain.

Ashley Cox, a 22-year old psychology major at The University of Montana-Missoula, was one of 17 survivors of breast cancer who climbed Mt. Aconcagua in Argentina earlier this year with the Breast Cancer Fund's Expedition Inspiration team. At just over 23,000 feet, Aconcagua is the highest peak in the Western Hemisphere.

"I surprised myself," Cox said. "I didn't think I'd do as well as I did."

It wasn't the first time Cox had been faced with a mountain-sized challenge. Four years ago, while still in high school, Cox was diagnosed with breast cancer. After a mastectomy, she was able to graduate with her classmates in Charlottesville, Va. in the spring of 1991.

Last year, during her third year at UM, Cox read about Expedition Inspiration in a magazine and called to find out about joining the team. She found out last summer that there was a place for her on the expedition's trek team. After months of training in and around Missoula, Cox left for Argentina in late January.

The Expedition Inspiration team, assembled by The Breast Cancer Fund a year earlier in

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February 1994, included a summit team and a trek team. The summit team of 10 alpine climbers, including six breast cancer survivors, would shoot for the summit of Aconcagua.

The trek team, of which Cox was a member, included 11 more breast cancer survivors as well as medical and scientific specialists in breast cancer. They planned to set up a base camp at 13,800 feet, with the option of climbing to 19,000.

"I tried not to have any expectations," Cox said. "I didn't want to be disappointed."

She did have one physical goal: to make it to 19,000 feet, more than 5,000 feet higher than the trek team's primary goal. A teammate's pulmonary problems meant the team had to turn around at 16,200. But that's still more than 2,000 feet higher than California's Mt. Whitney, the highest peak in the continental United States. At 16,200 feet, the trek team flew a banner with the names of breast cancer victims and survivors from all over the world.

In spite of not quite reaching her altitude goal, Cox feels the experience was a positive one. Among the highlights of her trip: "learning I had no problem with altitude," she said.

Another highlight was bonding with the other team members. "I felt completely taken in to the group," Cox said, even though there was a 13-year difference between her and the woman closest to her in age. At 22, Cox was the youngest member of the expedition; she says she's the youngest person she knows who has had breast cancer.

The two teams kept in radio contact with each other and cheered as the summit team reached their destination, Cox said. The entire expedition reunited the following day and celebrated their achievement with champagne and cheesecake. "It was a good example for women," Cox said. "I'm glad I was there."

Returning to Missoula and classes was, in a way, a letdown for her, although she didn't start feeling it for a few weeks.

"I started missing it really bad, sitting in a classroom instead of being outside," she said.

Cox's goals for the future include finishing her psychology degree and starting an outdoor program where she could take cancer victims out on wilderness expeditions.

And she plans to continue tackling mountains. "I'm going to be climbing for the rest of my life," Cox said. She'll be scaling Washington's Mt. Rainier this summer, and she's trying to plan a climbing trip to Alaska's Mount Denali in 1996.

"Life doesn't end after breast cancer," Cox said. "My life has just gotten inherently better."

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Local, dailies, The (Charlottesville) Daily Progress
CoxClimb.rl